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Washington, D.C. 20505

Nicaragua-Honduras: Implications of Recent Border Fighting

12 December 1986

Summary

Honduran airstrikes and troop movements apparently have induced Managua to withdraw most of its forces from the Las Vegas salient and temporarily halt its military campaign against the anti-Sandinista insurgent bases there. We believe, however, that the public attention that has been drawn to the rebel presence in Honduras and Tegucigalpa's related reluctance to continue providing sanctuary may yet lead to relocation of the bases. If the camps are not moved and Honduran forces withdraw, we believe the Sandinistas almost certainly will return in force to the salient. In the meantime, Managua will use publicity from the latest round of fighting and evidence of Honduran airstrikes on Nicaraguan territory to strengthen its calls for international observers to patrol the border. In our view, the Honduran military response during the past week does not signal any long-term willingness to fight on behalf of the Nicaraguan rebels. Honduras, however, is certain to use the current situation to press for additional military and economic assistance from the US--such as more favorable payment terms or an earlier delivery date for more advanced jet fighters. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by the Nicaragua and Central America Branches, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. It contains information available as of 11 December 1986. Questions and comments are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Middle America-Caribbean Division, ALA, [redacted]

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The Recent Fighting

The latest and largest Sandinista military operation against insurgents in the Las Vegas salient is now drawing to a close. In what we believe was an attempt to outflank rebel troops blocking their advance toward the camps, Nicaraguan forces attacked and overran Honduran Army positions in the western half of the salient last week. The Hondurans responded on 6 and 7 December by launching retaliatory airstrikes both in the salient and in northern Nicaragua, and by dispatching reinforcements and artillery to the border with US helicopter assistance. These actions appeared to take Managua by surprise, [redacted]

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In our judgment, the ultimate objective of Managua's campaign was to force the rebels out of the salient--rather than merely seek to block infiltration, as in previous years. From their positions inside the salient, regime troops gathered intelligence on the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) and used artillery fire, commando raids, and ambushes to inflict casualties and interdict the overland supply route. In early November, for example, the Sandinistas destroyed a truck carrying helicopter fuel on the only road to the main guerrilla camp at Yamales. [redacted]

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We believe the Sandinista cross-border operation also was intended to embarrass the Azcona administration by increasing public attention to Honduran support for the rebels. [redacted]

[redacted] the Sandinistas pressed forward in the salient because they believed turmoil within the Honduran military would prevent Tegucigalpa from responding forcefully. [redacted]

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[redacted] Over the past several years, Managua persistently has attempted to entice Tegucigalpa into a bilateral border settlement, and the publicity generated by the recent fighting is certain to heighten public uneasiness in Honduras. [redacted]

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In reaction to the fighting, Honduras has moved some 1,000 troops to staging areas west of the salient. The Hondurans have limited lift and logistical capability, however, as evidenced by their request that the US help ferry roughly 40 percent of the troops to Danli, about 50 miles from the fighting. Tegucigalpa has been reluctant to engage the Sandinistas with ground forces and probably hoped that the airstrikes would prompt a Nicaraguan withdrawal. [redacted]

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Managua's Next Steps


The Sandinistas' decision to withdraw most of their forces suggests Managua remains deterred by the threat of a wider war with possible US intervention. Nevertheless, we believe

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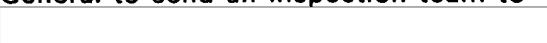
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regime troops are likely to continue patrolling the salient and--if the camps remain in place and the Honduran Army withdraws --almost certainly will return in force. In the meantime, Managua probably will use the troops concentrated in the border area to impede rebel infiltration and collect intelligence on insurgent movements and logistic activities. 



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At some point, possibly after more of the rebels have entered Nicaragua, regime forces may try to launch a large-scale assault on the rebel headquarters, training center, and other facilities remaining in the salient. Destroying the camps would require the movement of Nicaraguan artillery and BM-21 multiple rocket launchers across the border to bring them into effective range. The terrain on the eastern side of the salient would make such a move difficult, however, and any use of the better road network on the western side would involve clashes with the Honduran Army. 

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Nicaragua will use public attention to last week's fighting to press its case before the United Nations and other diplomatic forums for international supervision of the Honduran border. Managua already has asked the UN Secretary General to send an inspection team to the areas hit by the Honduran airstrikes last weekend. 

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 They also are likely to trumpet their claim that the US instigated the whole incident to draw attention away from the ongoing Congressional investigations of insurgent funding. 

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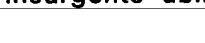
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Rebel Plans

The rebels likely will stick to their strategy of avoiding decisive engagements and not fighting to defend Honduran territory. 

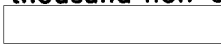
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 in our judgment, the political pressure on the rebels to reduce their presence in the salient and move some of their installations to more remote areas to the east undoubtedly will increase in the next few weeks as a result of the recent fighting. The Hondurans are pressing the insurgents to move their forces into Nicaragua as quickly as possible, according to the US Embassy. Also, as more of their troops infiltrate Nicaragua, the insurgents' ability to defend their bases from a future Sandinista incursion will be lessened. 



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Moving the rebel headquarters and other facilities from the salient probably would disrupt insurgent infiltration and resupply for a few weeks, particularly if carried out before most of the 9,000 combatants still in Honduras begin infiltrating into Nicaragua. Even if the main bases are moved, some logistics operations and several thousand non-combatants and family members probably would remain in the Yamales area. 

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The short-term effects of the recent fighting on rebel capabilities are unclear.


 the rebels probably will try to use the breather gained from the Sandinista withdrawal to distribute supplies to units and speed infiltration to increase operations inside

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The Honduran Perspective



In our view, the Honduran military response during the past week does not signal a long-term increased willingness to fight on behalf of the Nicaraguan rebels. As in the past, Tegucigalpa probably will respond to future Sandinista incursions only if Hondurans are attacked or there is strong domestic pressure to respond to violations of Honduran sovereignty. Even then, the Honduran response likely will be limited to artillery fire, airstrikes, and movement of reinforcements--all calibrated to give the Sandinistas ample opportunity to pull back and undertaken only after Tegucigalpa has obtained reassurances of US backing, including a commitment to implement security agreements if the situation worsens. 

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Honduran requests for additional military and economic assistance are likely to grow as a result of the recent fighting. Tegucigalpa already has requested ordnance to replace that expended in the airstrikes as well as \$7 million to compensate civilians displaced by the fighting. The effective performance of the Honduran Air Force last weekend, and the perception that it continues to be a deterrent on the Sandinistas, will reinforce Tegucigalpa's determination to seek more advanced fighter aircraft--with better payment terms, earlier delivery dates, or both--to retain air superiority in the region. 

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On the diplomatic front, the Hondurans are currently asking the US to reaffirm its commitment to mutual defense under the Rio Treaty. 

 a major clash between Honduran and Sandinista forces probably would lead them to demand that the US commit some troops--helicopter pilots, at a minimum--to combat areas. 

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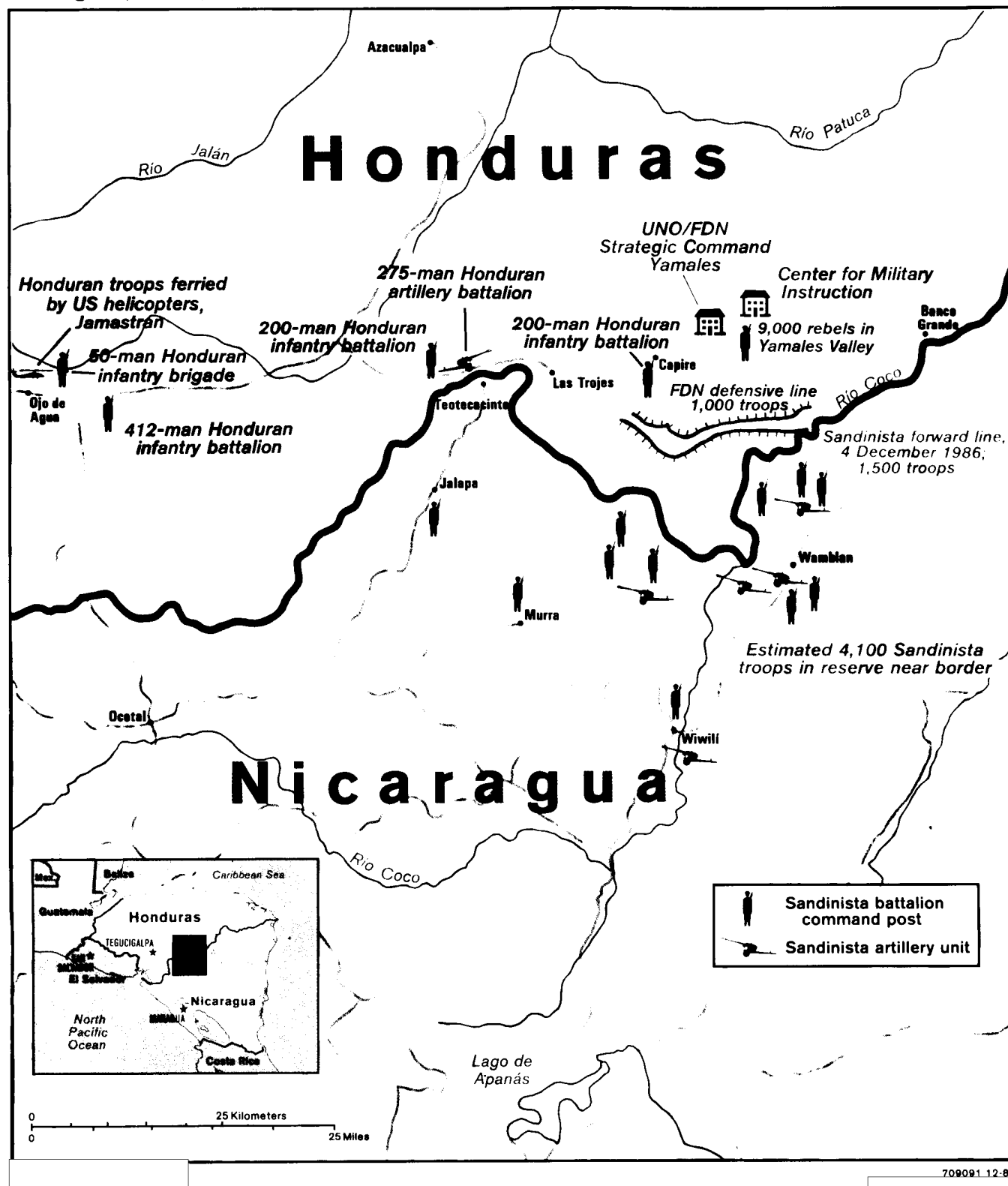
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